



Howkins, A. (2018). Review of *The Nature State: Rethinking the History of Conservation*. Edited by Wilko Graf von Hardenberg, Matthew Kelly, Claudia Leal, and Emily Wakild. *Environmental History*, 23(3), 624-625. [emy033].
<https://doi.org/10.1093/envhis/emy033>

Peer reviewed version

Link to published version (if available):
[10.1093/envhis/emy033](https://doi.org/10.1093/envhis/emy033)

[Link to publication record in Explore Bristol Research](#)
PDF-document

This is the author accepted manuscript (AAM). The final published version (version of record) is available online via Oxford University Press at <https://academic.oup.com/envhis/article/23/3/624/4995310> . Please refer to any applicable terms of use of the publisher.

University of Bristol - Explore Bristol Research

General rights

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the reference above. Full terms of use are available:
<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/red/research-policy/pure/user-guides/ebr-terms/>

Wilko Graf von Hardenberg, Matthew Kelly, Claudia Leal, and Emily Wakild (eds.), *The Nature State: Rethinking the History of Conservation* (Routledge Environmental Humanities Series, 2017)

This collection of essays on the history of conservation from around the world in the long twentieth century proposes the compelling idea of a “Nature State.” In a similar way that war is said to have made the state and the state made war, the editors of this collection propose that “Nature made the state, and the state made nature.” For many – probably almost all – environmental historians working today, this statement might be seen as a truism: states are clearly shaped by the nature of their territories, and what a state does or does not do affects the natural world. As noted in the introduction, the inter-relationships between the state and nature have been studied by scholars such as David Blackbourn and James Scott and have been theorized in ideas such as Adam Rome’s “environmental management state” and Arun Agrawal’s concept of environmentality. A question that this volume raises, therefore, is what does the notion of a “Nature State” add to our understanding of the history of conservation, and to the field of environmental history more broadly?

One major contribution of the collection is to highlight the near ubiquity of state-led attempts to protect nature in the long twentieth century. Here, the diversity of case studies in the collection is a tremendous strength. States as different as colonial regimes in the Philippines and India, communist regimes in Eastern Europe and China, military dictatorships in Latin America, and parliamentary democracies in Western Europe have all made efforts to institute policies aimed at protecting nature. By the end of the book a convincing case has been made that some effort to protect the natural world is almost part of the definition of being a state in the twentieth century.

Another important contribution of the collection is to attempt to turn the focus back onto the state. “If the state did have a hand in the production of nature,” the editors ask in the introduction, “where does this leave our opening gambit that nature also has a hand in the production of the state?” Here, the diversity of examples presented in this collection would seem to run somewhat counter to this goal. Conservation efforts have sometimes been genuine attempts to preserve nature, at other times they’ve been a useful façade for policies aimed at social control or geopolitical strategy; some conservation efforts have succeeded in achieving the state’s intentions, others have failed, and others never really tried. On a case-by-case basis, the history of conservation can certainly tell us something about the nature of a particular state at a particular time, and some of the chapters do make an effort to do this. But as framed in the introduction, the idea of “*the Nature State*” seems a little too monolithic to stand up to the specificity of historical analysis presented in the rest of the book.

The chapters themselves in this collection are, without exception, excellent, and were it not for its high price this book would be ideal reading for courses in global environmental history. Each chapter makes a concerted effort to engage with the idea of the Nature State, and a few efforts are made to cross-reference ideas from other chapters. The chapters work well together, and the idea of the Nature State certainly helps to provide a focus. As individual chapters, however,

it is not altogether clear what the concept of the Nature State adds to the analysis. In most, if not all, of the chapters the argument would seem to stand up without the need to rely on the Nature State, and occasionally the idea seems a little tacked on to a pre-existing case study.

If anything, the concept of the Nature State as proposed by this book does not go far enough. Why limit the focus of the Nature State to the history of conservation? For many states in the twentieth century, efforts to protect the natural world were just one part of their relationship to “Nature,” and state-focused histories of exploitation and degradation, control and improvement, and identity and belonging, would all seem to fit within a broader conception of the Nature State. As currently articulated, the concept of the Nature State is not fully convincing, but the authors of this collection deserve a lot of credit for proposing an idea that makes an interesting theoretical contribution to the field of environmental history.